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‘Religion’ and the Concept of the Buddha Way: Semantics of the Religious in Dōgen

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Abstract: In recent decades, the concept of religion, and specifically its application to non-Western historic cultural formations has come under critical scrutiny. This paper proposes the study of semantic fields as a method to explore the self-understanding of historic formations of what, in modern parlance, counts as religion, and thus, as a testing strategy for the concept of religion that is employed in scholarly analysis. It uses the said method to analyse three works by the medieval Japanese Buddhist monk Dōgen (1200–1253), who came to be revered as founder of the still extant Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism. By putting his notion of the ‘Buddha Way’ (*butsudō*) into strong relief, it provides a basis for comparison with modern concepts of religion. The conclusion is that Dōgen’s ideas conform to a surprisingly large extent with modern ideas. This may be one reason for his popularity in modern times. But Dōgen should not be taken to represent the general world-view of medieval Japan. Further comparative analyses of other corpora remain necessary to gauge the applicability of ‘religion’ as a category for the analysis of medieval Japanese culture.

Keywords: concept of religion, Zen Buddhism, Medieval Japan, Dōgen, semantic fields

1 ‘Religion’ after, and before, ‘religion’

Sometimes one is tempted to think that modernity, like Kronos, eats its own children. Or at least it seems to try hard to do so. The concept of religion is a case in point – at least if we follow the narrative put forth by scholars like Jonathan Z. Smith, and others, that “man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion.”¹ To Smith, ‘religion’ is

1 Smith 1997: xi.

a modern invention, and “solely the creation of the scholar’s study.” If that were true, ‘religion’ has come under attack from a new generation within precisely that group which had created it in the first place. I confess, however, to having doubts concerning this narrative. In fact, the literature that is adduced to finish off with ‘religion’ as a transtemporal and cross-cultural concept stops short of doing so: instead, it elucidates how a historically and culturally limited conceptualization of religion, construed after the paradigm of Western protestantism with its emphasis on a soteriology of belief in a transcendent numinous entity whose will is documented in a sacred scripture, leads, on the analytical level, to misrepresentations of the cultural institutions in question, their self-understanding, and their contexts.² It further demonstrates how legal, political and social practices informed by that concept, on the other hand, have re-shaped pre-existing cultural landscapes and incited institutional reforms from both without and within ‘religious’ bodies.³ This very process, ironically, is one of the reasons why religion, as a cultural reality, has not gone away after the critique of ‘religion’. The child is, in sum, not that of Kronos, and he has failed to eat it.

Be that as it may, I believe that the “critique of ‘religion’ as a cross-cultural category”⁴ served well to elucidate epistemological shortcomings and ideological agendas related to the over-generalization of a certain, limited conceptualization of the term. It has furthermore made us aware of a variety of alternatives, whether proposed under the heading of ‘religion’ or not, and of the formative power that the said concept of religion had, within the period of classical modernity⁵, over and against its alternatives. In studying what we have come to subsume under the category of religion, we will do well to remember these points.

First of all, we need to be aware that to address some source, or behavior, or institution as ‘religious’ is, at least in all instances where this does not conform with the self-identification of the object of analysis, first and foremost a statement about *our* received notions of it. The implications of said subsumption

² Or this is how I read, for example, Asad 2001; King 1999; Ford 2003; Shields 2010.

³ For the case of Japan, see eg. Snodgrass 2003, esp. pp. 115–154; Josephson 2006. Since this contribution is addressing readers without Japanological background as well, I refer to research literature in English wherever possible.

⁴ Fitzgerald 1997.

⁵ The term ‘classical modernity’ was introduced by Peter Osborne (1992: 68) in a critical historiographical essay, where it referred to the “long nineteenth century”; I would use another formulation of Osborne’s and describe classical modernity as “as the golden age of its cultural self-consciousness” (Osborne 1992: 72) – the time when the classic theories of modernity of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel were formulated. See also Habermas 2012: 445.

have to be made explicit, and they should be tested against the available evidence. Both demands are difficult to meet, albeit for different reasons: the first one requires a self-conscious questioning of one's agenda that will, of necessity, be limited by one's evaluation of what is trivial and self-evident, and what is possibly problematic. The second demand poses the more pedestrian, but similarly tricky problem of how to design testing strategies that lead us out of the circle of our preconceptions.

In this paper, I propose the study of semantic fields as one such testing strategy, and thus, a viable avenue to advance a nuanced analysis of the 'religious'. In doing so, I do not mean to champion this approach as an exclusive one; quite to the contrary, I believe that it is in need of complementation, e. g. via the study of legal norms, or of pertinent social practices. Even so, I sustain that studying the semantic field of the 'religious' can provide critical insights into the cognitive organization operative in a given corpus. And this may eventually also be of help in shaping alternative avenues for research into the matter in question.

There are two basic components to the kind of study I want to propose: the first is discourse analysis, i. e. the analysis of the modes of communication and the semantical sequences operative in the corpus in question.⁶ The second component is the analysis of the *semantic relations among key terms* used to identify and characterize what we subsume under the 'religious.' In other words, here we ask how those words that are used to identify and characterize what we understand to be a case of 'religion' are connected both logically and in terms of their respective meaning.⁷ The first component may not usually be considered to be part of the analysis of semantic fields. However, such analysis is crucial if we are interested in reconstructing the meaning of 'religious' utterances for those who used them, because the significance of an utterance is largely determined by the modes of communication and the types of semantical sequence it employs.⁸

While this kind of analysis may be conducted on any text that appears, to us, as a token of religion, some types of documents can be considered to be of special significance for our problem, i. e. the relationship between the category

6 'Modes of communication' here refers to the model of communication proposed by Roman Jakobson; in relation to the six elements of his model (sender, message, receiver, code, channel, context), he distinguishes the emotive, poetic, conative, metalinguistic, phatic and referential mode of communication (cf. Jakobson 1960). 'Semantical sequence' refers to Jean Michel Adam's theory of five basic kinds of organising propositions, i. e. the narrative, the descriptive, the explicative, the argumentative, and the dialogical sequence (Adam 2005).

7 Löbner 2002: 74–98 provides for a good overview and discussion of the pertinent relations.

8 This proposition is discussed in some detail by linguist J. M. Adam (2005: 19–28).

of religion and the cultural realities (including cognitive orientations) of the sources to which the category is applied. Generally speaking, I am referring to documents in which some cultural unit, which we believe to embody religion, is established as a matter of concern, either in order to delimit it over against other units, or in order to elucidate its substance and characteristics, or both. This may happen from the inside of a given unit, or from its outside—in fact, in documents concerned with delimitation of a unit *x vis à vis* other units *yz*, the internal and the external modes co-exist with some necessity. The following table gives examples of pertinent document types:⁹

Table 1: Document types identifying the “religious”.

| Document type | Semantic function |
|---|--|
| | delimitation |
| – administrative, legal or historiographical texts concerned with the relation between different kinds of authority | – of norms and spheres of authority (religious vs. secular or other) |
| – inter-denominational discussions, comparisons | – from other teachings / traditions |
| | internal differentiation |
| – texts establishing a new school / teaching | – of sub-denominations (schools, groups, etc.) |
| – texts regulating the relationship between denominations | |
| – classifications of expertise (curricula, layouts of institutional organisation etc.) | – of essential subjects, themes, issues within the tradition |

A systematic study of available documents of these kinds in a given cultural situation should provide us with a realistic understanding of how the field of what we term ‘religion’ was framed by relevant actors at a specific time and place – was ‘religion’ considered as a field of its own, with a claim to a specific kind of authority and validity, over and against e. g. political authority or legal validity? If yes, under what name and associated with which kinds of prerogatives? If no, which categories subsumed what we understand to be religion?

⁹ This overview is the result of a discussion meeting between members of the research group “Concepts and Taxonomies” at University of Zurich’s research priority program “Asia and Europe,” held in June 2011. Participants were: Slava Vetrov, Christoph Uehlinger, Raji Steineck, Roman Seidel, Peter Schreiner, Ulrich Rudolph, Angelika Malinar, Philip Hetmanczyk, Robert H. Gassmann, Wolfgang Behr. I am indebted to all members of this group for substantial contributions to the shaping of my framework of analysis.

What kind of sub-categories existed, and what was conceived of as *differentiae specifica*? The results of such analysis may then be compared to indicators of *implicit* understandings.

1.1 The corpus: Dōgen’s instructions for seekers on the Buddha way

In the following, I shall provide one part of such an analysis for a historical situation that has received much attention by scholars of Japanese religion, namely that of the early medieval period (the so-called Kamakura period, 1192–1333 CE). I will analyze pertinent writings of the Buddhist monk Dōgen (1200–1253), who, some generations after his demise, came to be revered as the founder of the Japanese Sōtō School of Zen Buddhism.¹⁰ He thus belongs to the group of founding figures who, in the classical modern view of Japanese religious history, brought about the popularization and indigenization of Buddhism in Japan.¹¹ I will discuss the potential shortcomings of that choice in a later paragraph. For now, it may suffice to say that he was a figure of some, though not eminent, relevance in his day. His attempt to establish himself as the leading proponent of the Buddha’s teaching met with failure. But he produced voluminous writings concerned with identifying and elucidating a comprehensive agenda for realizing the “Buddha Way” (*Butsudō* 仏道) – an agenda that has, so far, been more or less unambiguously described in modern literature as ‘religious.’ Additional characterizations, such as the identification of Dōgen as one of Japan’s most important philosophers, are, to my knowledge, never combined with the proposition that he was *not* a religious thinker.¹² The aim of the following analysis is to evaluate how this

¹⁰ On the formation of Dōgen as a canonical figure, see Bodiford 2006.

¹¹ This historiographical theory was famously criticized by Kuroda Toshio in the 1970s. See Kuroda 1996 and the re-evaluation of his intervention by Sueki Fumihiko (Sueki 1996).

¹² Watsuji Tetsurō, who has arguably been most seminal in pushing for a philosophical reading of Dōgen, says in his introduction: “I would be content if what I am writing would cause people to take interest in this outstanding religious person (*shūkyōka* 宗教家) and if it became clear that the essence of our culture cannot be correctly understand without reflecting on religionists of his kind.” (Watsuji 1992 [1926]: 237). Steven Heine states in the preface to his *Existential and Ontological Dimensions of Time in Heidegger and Dōgen*: “Finally, the work attempts to ground comparative philosophy and religion in a specific yet universal issue, underscoring the differences between Heidegger’s theoretical approach to ontological disclosure and Dōgen’s insistence that philosophy can and must spring from direct religious experience.” (Heine 1985: ix)

general assessment relates to the way he described his own agenda and positioned it in the cultural world around him.

A voluminous corpus of texts is rubricized under the author Dōgen; some of them, most famously the *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏¹³ collection of treatises in the vernacular, include his own original compositions, others are compilations from Zen lore by himself (the so-called *Mana-Shōbōgenzō*, or *Shōbōgenzō sanbyakusoku* 正法眼藏三百則) or edited records of his sayings compiled by his disciples in either Sino-Japanese (the *Eihei kōroku* 永平公録) or vernacular Japanese (the *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki* 正法眼藏隋聞記).¹⁴ I have selected five of his original compositions as the basis for this study: the *Bendōwa* 辨道話 (“Discourse on negotiating the way”)¹⁵, his first doctrinal exposition, written in 1231 in the vernacular, while Dōgen was living in relative obscurity in an abandoned temple south of the capital; *Gakudō yōjin shū* 學道用心集 (“Essentials in the Study of the Way”)¹⁶, written three years later as a basic introduction for the growing group of his monastic disciples; the fascicles *Bukkyō* 佛教 (“Buddha’s Teaching”) and *Bukkyō* 佛經 (“Buddha’s Sūtras”)¹⁷, both written at a time when Dōgen faced a group of new disciples from an outlawed rival Zen lineage, who sought protection in his community but apparently held views he did not condone, and was confronted with increasing adversity, eventually prompting a re-location from the capital to a remote location in North-Western Japan; finally, *Shizen bikku* 四禪比丘 (“The *bhikṣu* [‘monk’] in the fourth stage of immersion”), a text from the new redaction of the *Shōbōgenzō*, written around 1250 at the latest stage in his career. This text once more treats what Dōgen perceives to be aberrant teachings among Zen Buddhists in his day.¹⁸ In terms of the analytical matrix sketched out above, the five works can be related in the following manner:

¹³ I use the Hepburn system for transcriptions from the Japanese. In quotes from Japanese sources, I use traditional (unabridged) characters if these are used by the edition cited.

¹⁴ There are by now three modern editions of his collected writings, and numerous editions and translations of selected works. I use Ōkubo Dōshū’s two volume-edition of the collected writings (Ōkubo 1969), quoted below as DZZ I and II. As for translations into English (ET) besides those quoted below, see the Stanford Sōtō Zen Text Project (<http://scbs.stanford.edu/sztp3/>), and Leighton 2004; Leighton and Okumura 1996. See also Heine (1997) for a discussion of the relative position and importance of his writings, and Steineck (2014) for a discussion of the various constellations of authorship in the works belonging to that “canon”.

¹⁵ DZZ I: 729–746; ET Waddell and Abe 1971.

¹⁶ DZZ II: 253–260; ET in Tanahashi 1985: 31–44.

¹⁷ DZZ I: 405–414; ET in Nishijima 1994–1999, vol. 3: 101–113.

¹⁸ DZZ I: 704–716; ET in Nishijima 1994–1999, vol. 4: 187–194.

Table 2: Document types in the corpus.

| Taxonomic function | Kinds of documents |
|---|---|
| delimitation | |
| – of norms and spheres of authority (“religious” vs. x) | <i>Bendōwa</i> (1231) |
| – from other teachings / traditions | <i>Bukkyō</i> (“Buddha’s Sūtras”, 1243) <i>Shizen bikku</i> (ca. 1250?) |
| internal differentiation | |
| – sub-denominations (schools, groups, etc.) | <i>Bendōwa</i> (1231), <i>Bukkyō</i> (“Buddha’s Teaching”, 1241) |
| – essential subjects, themes, issues | <i>Gakudō yōjin shū</i> (1234), <i>Bukkyō</i> (“Buddha’s Teaching”, 1241), <i>Bukkyō</i> (“Buddha’s Sūtras”, 1243). |

The chronological order is of some importance, because the texts represent all stages of Dōgen’s writing career. There has been extensive discussion about whether or not his teaching underwent significant changes in terms of its essential content: on the one side of the spectrum of opinions, some scholars have argued that he started out with a fairly universalistic and philosophical bent, but lapsed into increasing sectarianism in later stages of his career (as represented by the fascicles “Buddhist Sūtras” and *Shizen bikku*).¹⁹ On the opposite side, some see a turn from antinomian, elitist mystical philosophy to a more orthodox brand of Buddhism precisely in his later years.²⁰ I would concur with Steven Heine’s assessment of the problems associated with either position – namely that both of them are based on selective chronologies and corpora, and ignore the discursive setting of the writings in question, which addressed different audiences in highly divergent situations.²¹ Furthermore, as will become clear in the following paragraphs, Dōgen is consistent in his polemic against a certain brand of mystical monism that is conducive to ethical antinomianism and doctrinal syncretism, and he upholds a position that he styles as orthodox Buddhist teaching.

On a different note, the titles of the first two writings, *Bendōwa* and *Gakudō yōjin shū*, make apparent the fact that, to both Dōgen and his addressees, it was

¹⁹ Dumoulin et al. 1990, Bielefeldt 1985.

²⁰ This position was most prominently put forth by Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō, see Hakamaya 1992.

²¹ Heine 1994, 1997, 2006.

self-evident that “the way” (*dō* 道) in question was the Buddha Way (*butsudō* 仏道), which, for fear of anachronism, I will for now refrain from equating with “Buddhism” (*bukkyō* 仏教). There was in both cases no need to distinguish this Buddha Way from other “ways” (whatever “way” meant), since Dōgen was addressing an audience already committed to it; but there was some dispute as to what precisely the Buddha Way consisted of, and what would be essential to those who aspired to it.²² In these and other writings, extensive delimitation from other teachings occurs only in terms of a rectification of perceived delusions about the Buddha Way – including the idea that it was ultimately one with the other teachings – and it is in this context where the latter is explicitly identified. Furthermore, other teachings are never discussed, in Dōgen’s works, for their own merits or for the sake of discussion or dialogue between various different denominations.²³

2 Negotiating the way

In the following, I shall discuss the texts in chronological order, starting with a discourse analysis and proceeding to an elucidation of the semantic fields of key terms.

As mentioned above, the first text, *Bendōwa* 辨道話 (“Discourse on negotiating the way”; in the following: *Discourse*) was composed by Dōgen in autumn 1231 in the vernacular.²⁴ We do not know exactly who was the recipient of the manuscript, but it probably circulated among his disciples and relatives / acquaintances at court at the time. Although the title indicates orality, there is no evidence that it was based on actual verbal communication. This is in contradistinction to a large part of the vernacular *Shōbōgenzō* collection, which was based on informal “Dharma talks” given to various audiences at Dōgen’s temples of residence.²⁵

²² One feels tempted to write “to those who walked it,” but that, again, would be an anachronism: the Buddha Way in Dōgen’s language is “attained,” “grasped,” or, *horribile dictu*, “missed,” but one does not walk it. See Steineck 2018. This may in part be due to the fact that the character *dō* 道, if used in a verbal sense, meant “to say, to speak”, making the primary meaning of *butsudō* “Buddha’s sayings” (cf. *Bukkyōgo daijiten*, entry “Butsudō”).

²³ Lest this should invite an evolutionary view—from narrow parochialism to enlightened generosity—let me hasten to remind the reader that four centuries earlier, the Shingon patriarch Kūkai integrated all known teachings of the time into his system.

²⁴ I have discussed this text in more detail in previous publications (Steineck 2009b and 2015), and reiterate some points from these publications here in an abbreviated form.

²⁵ Heine 1997.

In terms of its overall sequence of propositions, *Discourse* starts with a passage describing a mysterious practice shared by all enlightened beings. It identifies this practice with seated meditation (*zazen* 坐禪) and extols it as the superior gate to the state of self-induced immersion in highest insight (*jijuyō zammai* 自受用三昧).²⁶ Why this should be so, is in need of explanation, and the explanation follows after the author has established his own record and legitimized his position as a teacher of the “right law/dharma of the Buddha house (*Bukke no shōbō* 佛家の正法).”²⁷ Remarkably (at least from a modern, doctrine-oriented point of view), the first step in the explication proper consists of a narrative of transmission.²⁸ Only after that is the reader informed about the metaphysical workings of the practice identified with highest insight: Seated meditation is supposed to lead to immediate contact with all Buddhas and patriarchs and to transform the realm of practice into one of enlightenment.²⁹ The following questions and answers delimit the teaching in a field of competing interpretations of the Buddha Way. They also address questions of the feasibility of its teaching for disciples remaining in the secular world, thus displaying concern for individual salvation.³⁰ There is no general discussion of alternatives outside the Buddha Way, and no general survey of the field of possible “ways” or “teachings.” Since the addressees have been made out to be true disciples of the Buddha, such discussion would arguably have been out of place. However, the question and answer part contains an extensive refutation of the proposition of an eternal essence of enlightenment, identified with the faculties of perception and discrimination. This view, advanced by some Zen Buddhists, is identified by Dōgen as not belonging to the Buddha Way.³¹ Furthermore, the final section contains an argument concerning the legitimacy of the endeavour to explicate a new interpretation of the Buddha Way without being authorized to do so by a royal request.³² It thus points to a contemporary norm placing discussions on the Buddha Way under the control of royal authority, and at the same time attempts to establish a (possibly new) normative understanding that would accept legitimizing motives *beside* authorization by royal command.

26 DZZ I: 729.

27 DZZ I: 730.

28 DZZ I: 730–731.

29 DZZ I: 731–732.

30 ... and disproving Timothy Fitzgerald, who believes that such a concern was absent in Japanese culture. Fitzgerald 1997: 94. Cf. DZZ I: 731–745.

31 DZZ I: 738–740.

32 DZZ I: 746.

As to the mode of communication, the *Discourse* gives a first exposition of Dōgen's teaching, couched in terms of the "true essence" (*shinketsu* 眞訣) of the "right law/dharma of the Buddha house" (*Bukke no shōbō* 佛家の正法). Its purported aim is to inform (*shirashimen to su* しらしめんとす) those earnestly seeking the Buddha Way of this essence.³³ The text is therefore primarily referential, although it carries a strong conative overtone: it informs about something that is "right" (*shō/tadashi* 正) and thus carries strong normative expectations towards conduct. In fact, one might say that the ulterior motive is conative, although the form of the message is largely referential. Occasional emotive expressions concern either the sad fact of aberrant positions or the sad fate of earnest seekers on the way who go astray because of the absence of true teachers.

The choice of semantic sequences confirms this observation. The dominant sequence type is that of *explication*, with several descriptive and narrative sequences supporting the argument.

It should be noted that, by choosing to present his message as an explication (instead of an argument, or narrative), the author locates himself in a position of authority that is in some contrast to his actual social status: still young and with no clerical rank to speak of, and only the authorisation of a Chinese master on record in a denomination that was not yet acknowledged by royal authority in Japan, Dōgen had, in the eyes of his contemporaries, at this point in time only questionable authority of judgment over other Buddhist lineages and doctrines; what is more, he had gained some degree of notoriety for having alienated parts of the clergy.³⁴ For all his assumption of a position of superior insight, the precariousness of his status is exposed in the final passage of the *Discourse*, one of the few instances where Dōgen resorts to *argumentation* in order to establish the legitimacy of the document itself.³⁵ This would not have been necessary had Dōgen been authorized by either the clergy or royal command to expatiate on his views – a position that he apparently sought, but never achieved, and therefore a decade later disparaged in the fascicle "Buddha's Sutras."³⁶

33 DZZ I: 730.

34 See the materials presented in Ōkubo 1966: 185–190 and Funaoka 2014: 106–108. Ōkubo believed that Dōgen was forced to live in obscurity because of pressure from the powerful monks of Enryaku-ji, while Funaoka more cautiously argues that he probably simply fell out with the community of Kennin-ji, where he was living for the first years after his return from China.

35 DZZ I: 746.

36 DZZ I: 413, cf. Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 3: 111.

Table 3: Structure and semantic sequences of the *Discourse*.

| Surface structure | Thematic progression | Semantic sequences (meso-level) | Macro-level sequence (explication) |
|--------------------|---|---|--|
| I.a | Seated meditation (<i>zazen</i>) is the immediate realization of the Buddhas' immersion into highest insight (<i>samādhi</i>) | descriptive: short summary of the virtues of <i>zazen</i> | presenting the object |
| I.b | spiritual autobiography: Dōgen's own quest from entering the monastery to writing the <i>Discourse</i> | explicative: why this text / author's legitimacy, main argument: autobiographical narrative | legitimizing the speaker |
| I.b' I.a' | <i>zazen</i> in Buddhist history, eulogy: the virtues of <i>zazen</i> | explicative: why is <i>zazen</i> the essential and superior practice? main arguments: narrative (tradition story) and descriptive (what happens in / through <i>zazen</i> ; connected to narrative) | explication through authoritative tradition explication through metaphysics of <i>zazen</i> |
| II. | Questions and Answers (<i>mondō</i>): disputation of anticipated objections; 18 questions and answers | explicative: various sub-sequences (descriptive, narrative, explicative, argumentative, almost no dialogue ...) a) 1–9: why is <i>zazen</i> the supreme practice? b) 10–18: how is enlightenment through <i>zazen</i> possible, and why is <i>zazen</i> necessary? | additional explication of various problems / questions |
| III. (I.ab"; II.') | conclusion: legitimizing and positioning the text, | argument: the exposition is legitimate even though it was not requested by the authorities | legitimizing the document |

To sum up, this is a document presented by an expert of something called the Buddha Way, commanding precarious credentials, to an audience that is expected to share adherence to that way. The expert tries to assume a position of authority, and he gives a new interpretation of said Buddha Way that is contestable; however, he avoids to argue for his interpretation and instead resorts to explication, placing himself in a position of superior knowledge and insight. Conversely, his readership is relegated to the position of disciples in need of instruction. The main content of the ‘teaching’ is twofold: firstly, a history of transmission, and secondly, a practice of meditation that is supposed to bring about immediate contact, indeed unity, between the practitioner and beings of a superior quality. In accordance with the discourse setting of ‘teaching’, the communication mode is predominantly referential, although the ulterior goal is to change the recipients’ behavior. A further agenda consists in securing a separate field of normativity for the Buddha Way beside that of legal authority, which resides uncontestedly (at least as the *Discourse* is concerned) with the royal court.

In putting forward its interpretation of the “Buddha Way,” the *Discourse* makes operative use of a web of logical and semantical relations that further determine the meaning of the term beyond explicit propositional explication or definition. The following table presents the various ways by which the object of the teaching is identified in the initial exposition (sections Ia, Ib, Ib’ in Table 3).

Table 4: Identification/characterisation of the object of teaching.

| Locus | Quote / translation | Identifying/qualifying terms |
|------------------|--|--|
| § 1, DZZ I: 729. | 諸佛如來、ともに妙法を單傳して、阿耨菩提を證するに、最上無爲の妙術あり。The Buddha-Tathāgatas transmit the mysterious law/dharma together, and in attesting to <i>anuttara bodhi</i> (“supreme insight”) they possess the miraculous technique of highest <i>wuwei/asamṣkṛta</i> (“non-interference/the unconditioned”). | – superior entities with honorific names (Buddha, Tathāgata) – predicates indicating the extraordinary ³⁷ (wondrous/miraculous) – superlatives – technical terms indicating connection to a primary & secondary locus (India, China) |

(continued)

³⁷ I prefer the term ‘extraordinary’ to ‘supernatural’, because ‘supernatural’ presupposes a concept of ‘nature’ that *excludes* certain kinds of actions and events, such as ‘miracles’ and the like, from the realm of the natural. Such a concept of nature did not exist in medieval Japan.

Table 4: (continued)

| Locus | Quote / translation | Identifying/qualifying terms |
|------------------|---|---|
| § 3, DZZ I: 730. | ... 佛家の正法をしらしめんとす。これ眞訣ならむかも。いはく、 ... attempting to make known the right law/dharma of the Buddha House. This will surely match with the true essence. It is said: ... | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – metonym (home & focal person/ founder (“Buddha House”)) – epistemic/practical norm (“right dharma/law”) – metaphysical predicate (“true essence”) |
| ibd. | 大師釋尊、靈山會上にして法を迦葉につけ、祖祖正傳して、菩提達磨尊者にいたる。... The great teacher, the Venerable Śākya gave the law/ dharma to Kāśyapa during the assembly on the Spirit Mountain, and it was rightly transmitted from patriarch to patriarch, until it reached Bodhidharma. ... | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – founder (Śākyamuni) – time and place of foundational teaching – line of transmission |
| § 4, ibd. | かくのごとく單傳して、おのづから六祖大鑑禪師にいたる。このとき、眞實の佛法まさに東漢に流演して、節目にかかはらぬむねあらはれき。 Through such plain transmission, it reached of itself the 6th patriarch Dhyāna-Master Dajian. At this time, the true real Buddha dharma/law verily spread in the Eastern Han, and the teaching beyond any measure appeared. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – line of transmission – epistemic-ontological normative predicates (“true real”) – transcendent predicate (“beyond measure”) |
| ibd. | ときに六祖に二位の神足ありき。... その二派の流通するに、よく五門ひらけたり。いはゆる法眼宗、潯仰宗、曹洞宗、雲門宗、臨濟宗なり。見在、大宋には臨濟宗のみ天下にあまねし。五家ことなれども、ただ一佛心印なり。 At that time, the 6th patriarch had two spiritual feet (i. e., capable disciples). ... when the two streams spread, five gates developed. These are the Fayuan School, the Guiyang school, the Caodong School, the Yunmen school, and the Linji School. Today, only the Linji School holds sway in the Great Song [Empire]. The five houses may differ, but they are only the one Buddha heart seal. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – internal differentiation: A single tradition, differentiating in two streams, ending up in five gates, identified as <i>shū</i> (schools). Emphasis on unity. Other Buddhist schools are only implicitly mentioned as having transmitted writings only. |

As is apparent in the table, the teaching of the *Discourse* identifies its field of concern via the names and honorific titles of beings with extraordinary or even superlative qualities. These are said to transmit something of both epistemic and practical normative significance. Strong emphasis is placed on a distinct line of transmission. Technical terms point to a soteriology of insight leading to freedom/unconditioned existence.

The precise meaning of these defining aspects is put more sharply into relief by an analysis of the semantical oppositions in which they stand in the text itself. Some examples are given in the following table:

Table 5: Fundamental oppositions.

| Locus | Focal term | Opposed to | Quality of opposition |
|-----------------|--|--|---|
| DZZ I: 730, 739 | Right Law of the Buddha House 仏家の正法 | outlying ways 外道, obstructive views 邪見 | antonymical: belonging vs. excluded |
| 729, 735 | right transmission 正傳, i. e. true 真 practice 修行 | writings only/false 偽 practice | gradual: complete vs. insufficient |
| 734 | right teacher 正師 | letter-studying teacher of the law/dharma 文 字習學の法師 | gradual: complete vs. insufficient |
| 741 | renunciants 出家人 | men and women abiding in the profane world 在俗の男女 | transcended opposition: sublated in superior practice |
| 740 | birth-and-death 生死 | Nirvana 涅槃 | co-extensive, but intensional antonyms |

According to the *Discourse*, the Buddha Way thus stands in a fundamental and antonymical opposition to all non-Buddhist views, which are characterized as “outlying” and “obstructive”. Within the Buddha Way, there is an opposition between the right transmission, defined by true practice (i. e. *zazen*), and the transmission of the canonical writings only, without concomitant practice. Accordingly, the right teachers, who transmit both an understanding of the scriptures and the practice are opposed to those who only study and teach the canon. Among adherents of the Buddha Way, there is furthermore a distinction between those who formally reject ties and obligations to their family (lit. “those leaving their house”) and those who continue to abide in the profane world. This opposition, however, is overcome by the virtues of the supreme practice taught by the *Discourse*. Finally, the *Discourse* also maintains that the fundamental soteriological opposition between the cycle of birth and

death and Nirvana is purely intensional: there is thus no transcendent realm in an ontological sense.

Further information about the semantics of the Buddha Way in the *Discourse* can be gleaned from an analysis of the categorical relations into which the key terms enter in the text. I shall use here a syncretic list of categories collated (or, to be more honest, bastardized) from Aristoteles and Kant. To start with *substance*, much concerning “what the Buddha Way is” (according to the *Discourse*) has already been described in some detail above. Highest, liberating insight, true practice (of seated meditation) and a line of authoritative transmission appear to be most essential. In terms of *quantity*, the *Discourse* maintains that the Buddha Way is *one*, although even its orthodox tradition is differentiated into the five “houses”.³⁸ These, by the way, all belong to the Zen School (*zenshū* 禪宗), which the *Discourse* insists on identifying with the Buddha Way: it is thus, according to its nomenclature, not a “school” beside others, but the one true tradition of authentic practice and teaching.³⁹ As for its *quality*, the Buddha Way is *real* with additional characterizations such as “mysterious,” “unsurpassed” or “right” pointing to its extraordinary and normative aspects. Its fundamental unity notwithstanding, the Buddha Way *comprises* such things as authoritative writings (*kyōsho* 經書), methods of practice (*mon* 門), three canonical fields of study (*sangaku* 三学), six perfections (*rokudo* 六度), etc.⁴⁰ The Buddha Way is furthermore locally *positioned* through an origin in India and a path of transmission via China to Japan.⁴¹ Its temporal existence, however, is not bound by restrictions, as the *Discourse* insists that the substance of the way is identical independent of time. Attainment of the Buddha Way is *conditional* on “right trust” (*shōshin* 正信), and leads to “insight” (*satori* 悟り);⁴² right practice will lead to full *possession* of the Way, but without practice, there is no possession. In the whole process, the Buddha Way is both passive, in its being attained, and active, in its supporting those who commit themselves to right practice.

To sum up, the semantic analysis of the *Discourse* makes the object of its teaching look suspiciously like a *religion*: There is a soteriological agenda, reference to beings of a higher quality, the idea of an orthodox teaching and line of transmission, a practical and dogmatic normativity that bears strong

³⁸ DZZ I: 730.

³⁹ DZZ I: 736.

⁴⁰ DZZ I: 734, 736.

⁴¹ DZZ I: 730.

⁴² DZZ I: 733.

analogies to law but is not subsumed under state authority, a separate social realm of dedicated practitioners, replete with its own hierarchies and fields of study and expertise, and repeated reference to insights beyond the regular human level and mysterious capacities. There are terms to conceive of other teachings outside the Buddha Way. But they are highly charged with negative values and thus far from neutral. The common denominator would be *-dō* 道 (“way”), although this term does not appear, in the *Discourse*, as a general noun subsuming both the “Buddha Way” and the “Outlying Ways”.

In this sense, the similarity of the semantic field between the Buddha Way according to the *Discourse* and the classical modern notion of religion may still be misleading. To briefly discuss some of the more salient differences, in terms of substance, the *Discourse* may make ample reference to the mysterious and extraordinary qualities of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and patriarchs, whom it clearly treats as elevated and sacred beings, but it disqualifies the notion of an ontologically transcendent realm with soteriological qualities. Although it mentions “right trust” (*shin*, which could also be translated as “belief”) as an important condition of salvation, trust is not so much characterized by belief in certain doctrines, but by unwavering dedication to the “true practice” of seated meditation. The “doctrinal” elements are again not so much concerned with the actions and commandments of a higher being, but first and foremost with a lineage of transmission, and secondly, again, with the realization of right *practice*. If the Buddha Way of the *Discourse* is a religion, it appears to be more concerned with what people do, than with what they think or believe. However, this again may be a misleading exoticism, since the *practice* in question is supposed to lead to right – even supreme – insight, and thus to a substantial change in the cognitive state of the practitioner. Furthermore, we need to remember that the *Discourse* places itself in a tradition that sees “ignorance” (*mumyō* 無明) as the root of all evil. Then again, in the language of the *Discourse*, insight is not so much a question of subjective “experience,” but a matter of “proof” (*shō* 證) through action in accordance with the standard established by the Buddhas and Patriarchs.⁴³

3 Confirming the essentials

It would be tedious to discuss the other texts in similar detail, since there is no major change in the semantic of the Buddha Way in comparison with

⁴³ DZZ I: 729.

the *Discourse*. I will therefore focus on additional aspects and important qualifications.

The *Gakudō yōjin shū* 學道用心集 (“Essentials of Studying the Way,” below: *Essentials*⁴⁴) is a short document of ten sections written 1234 in the *kanbun* (logographic notation) style as a basic manual for Dōgen’s monastic disciples. Unlike the *Discourse*, it is not a document that attempts to convince outsiders or potential, but as yet unconfirmed disciples. Instead, it was probably written for the basic instruction of the monastic community that had begun to form around Dōgen at that time. In keeping with the apparent aim to guide and educate, the communicative mode is informative-referential and conative. The dominant type of semantic sequence is again explicative. But in *Essentials* (as opposed to the *Discourse*) this is a choice in keeping with the status of the addresser, because Dōgen was the uncontested preceptor of this community.

That said, it should be noted that an eighteenth century commentary attests to a remarkable aspect of text usage that stands in some contrast to these observations, as it enjoins members of the monastic community to *recite* the text on a daily basis.⁴⁵ We do not know when this kind of text usage originated, but should it have been intended from the start, the *Essentials* may have not been for purposes of *information* to the extent the communicative mode of the text suggests; instead, they would have served as a kind of aide-memoire, and as a token of allegiance to the founder.

As regards the previous discussion about the status of the cognitive versus the practical in Dōgen’s *Buddha Way*, the first section of the *Essentials* significantly deals with the postulate “to bring forth the *bodhi*-mind” (*Bodaishin o hassubeki koto* 可發菩提心事).⁴⁶ The technical term “*bodhi*-mind” is elucidated by a reference to an alleged saying of the Indian partriach Nāgārjuna identifying it with “the mind singly contemplating birth and cessation and the impermanence of the profane world” (*tada seken no shōmetsu mujō wo kanzuru kokoro* 唯觀世間生滅無常心). As Dōgen explains, to focus for a long time on such contemplation will prevent the arousal of the “thought of a permanent self” (*goga no kokoro* 吾我心) and of craving after “fame and gain” (*myōri* 名利); instead, the practitioner of such contemplation will “practice the way like he was trying to save himself from a fire on his head” (*gyōdō wa zunen wo sukuu* 行道救頭燃).⁴⁷ Obviously, while the Buddha Way is realized through

⁴⁴ DZZ II: 253–260.

⁴⁵ Shinohara 1990: 259. The reference is to the *Gakudō yōjinshū monge* 學道用心集開解, a commentary by Menzan Zuihō 面山瑞方 (1683–1769).

⁴⁶ DZZ II: 253.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

practice, such practice must be sustained by whole-hearted *cognizance* of a certain ontological truth.⁴⁸ Incidentally, the *Essentials* sum up proper conduct of disciples of the Buddha Way by two components: listening to the teaching of a “right master,” and practicing seated meditation. Here again, we find the combination of a cognitive activity with a practice as defining the core of the right path.

As is apparent from the phrases quoted in the above paragraph, the *Essentials* operate with a contrastive opposition of the common world and the Buddha’s teaching that is strongly reminiscent of the distinction between the profane and the sacred. Consider the first explicative sentence of section three “In the Buddha Way, it is absolutely necessary to prove and enter by way of practice” (*Butsudō wa kanarazu gyō ni yorite shōnyū subeki koto* 佛道必依行可證入事): “A common (*zoku* 俗) [teacher] said: Through study one can gain wealth. The Buddha taught: Within practice there is realization (*shō* 證). It is unheard-of that without studying someone should earn wealth or that without practicing someone should attain realization.”⁴⁹ While the emphasis in this passage is on the analogies between both realms, the distinction is clearly maintained, and other sections repeatedly reinforce the contrasting of “fame and gain” (the alleged principle of the common world) with the *bodhi*-mind and the realm of right practice and enlightenment.

Section 7 of the *Essentials* contains an instance, singular in our corpus, where the nominal phrase *dō* is used as a *hyperonym* denoting all extant “ways”. This, however, is balanced by the immediate assertion of the absolute superiority of the Buddha Dharma/Law: “The Buddha Dharma excels among various ways. For that reason people seek it. When the Tathāgata dwelt in the world, there were no two teachings and no two teachers.”⁵⁰

In sum, analysis of the semantics in the *Essentials* confirms the impression that Dōgen’s concept of the Buddha Way is in many ways congruent with the modern notion of religion, with the important qualifications that strong emphasis is placed on the question of lineage and allegiance to a “right master,” and that a specific practice (seated meditation) with a strong corporeal aspect is

⁴⁸ Is it sophistry to remark here that Immanuel Kant defined “belief” by an assumption of the truth of a particular proposition that is supported by experience and reason and strong enough to become the basis of action? Cf. his *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 822–828/B851–856; Kant 1998: 852–857.

⁴⁹ English translation modified after Tanahashi 1985: 33.; cf. DZZ II: 254.

⁵⁰ ET modified after ibd.: 39. *Migi, buppō wa shodō ni masaretari, yue ni hito kore o motomu. Nyorai zaise wa mattaku nikyō nashi, mattaku nishi nashi.* 右佛法勝于諸道。所以人求之。如來在世。全無二教。全無二師。 DZZ II: 258.

presented as essential part of the doctrine. Furthermore, while *dō* and *kyō* can function as hyperonyms which, in principle, subsume various ‘religions’, Dōgen regularly denies the equivalence of the hyponyms and insists on the superiority of the Buddha Way he promotes: his taxonomy is clearly a partisan one, and not crafted or suited to the equanimous contemplation and analysis of various ways of life.

3.1 Insisting on Buddha’s teachings

According to its colophons, the fascicle “Buddha’s teachings” is based on an informal lecture Dōgen gave to his monastic community at Kōshō-ji, in the vicinity of Heian-kyō (present day Kyōto), in December 1241 or 1242.⁵¹ It apparently reacts to the influx of a new group of followers hailing from the Nihon Daruma shū 日本達磨宗, in the spring of 1241. The latter denomination was an ill-fated school of Zen that had been outlawed for its allegedly antinomian teachings.⁵²

In this fascicle, Dōgen maintains a mystical and holistic view, according to which the Buddha’s teaching is one and ever-present in all parts of reality – a position that was probably shared by his addressees. At the same time, he takes issue with an interpretation of this position that would identify supreme truth with an insight transcending language, transmitted outside the verbal teachings as laid down in the canonical writings (Skt. *sūtra*, Jap. *kyō* 経), and communicated independently of them (*kyōge betsuden* 教外別傳).⁵³ This position was widely held within the Song period Chan school,⁵⁴ and apparently it was also embraced by the followers of the Nihon Daruma shū.

The fascicle takes the form of an argumentative sequence. It starts with the thesis that the Buddha’s teaching is one and ever-present, which probably constituted the common ground between Dōgen and his new followers. The scriptures are, as Dōgen goes on to qualify, one of its integral parts. This is opposed to the view that “the one mind that is the supreme vehicle” was communicated by way of a separate transmission, outside and apart from verbal teachings. The antithesis is refuted by way of, among others, a *reductio ad*

⁵¹ DZZ I: 306–314, here: p. 314. ET in Nishijima/Cross 1994–1999, vol. 2: 55–69; here: p. 69. Nishijima and Cross list only one colophon, dating the text to 1241.

⁵² Ōkubo 1966: 406–446, esp. 416–418; Faure 1987, Heine 2006: 158.

⁵³ DZZ I: 307. Cf. Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol 2: 56.

⁵⁴ See Foulk 1999.

absurdum type of argument: if the true heart of the Buddha was communicated outside the verbal teachings, the teachings would conversely be “transmitted outside of the heart” (*shingebetsuden* 心外別傳), and then they should not have been delivered at all.⁵⁵

Dōgen then discusses two cases from Zen lore that seem to corroborate the standpoint of a separate transmission, and argues to the contrary. In this context, he gives a detailed description of three paradigms of internal differentiation of the teaching into “three vehicles” (*sanjō* 三乘), “twelve divisions of the teaching” (*jūni bunkyō* 十二分教), and “nine divisions of the teaching” (*kyūbunkyō* 九分教), respectively⁵⁶. This descriptive sequence takes up the remainder of the fascicle. We need not review the details here. Suffice it to say that the first term (“three vehicles”) refers to the standard Buddhist paths towards salvation (by hearing the Buddha teach and following his advice, by reaching enlightenment by oneself, and by dedicating oneself to the path of the Bodhisattva, vowing to save all sentient beings before attaining nirvana for oneself). The second and third term pertain to different ways of listing and sub-dividing Buddhist lore, including not only *sūtras* and commentaries, but also legendary accounts of previous lives and miraculous deeds of the Buddha.

In the context of the fascicle, the descriptive sequence supports the main thesis in two ways: The antithesis mentions only the “three vehicles” and “twelve divisions.” By adding a third paradigm of internal differentiation, Dōgen assumes a position of superior knowledge, placing him above his opponents.

Secondly, Dōgen insists that each part of each division is an inclusive realization of the whole of the Buddha’s teaching, and that no realization of this teaching negates or excludes another. In other words, Dōgen embraces the holistic viewpoint that the Buddha’s teaching is present in every single particle of dust. But he also argues that when it is perceived as such, the resulting insight must comprehend what is said in the scriptures.

In sum, this is an argument about the binding character of a certain set of verbal / written teachings, and the orthodox ways of practice. Both are connected to the Buddha. Together with him, they form the ultimate source of authority. The verbal / written teachings, subdivided alternatively into twelve or nine groups, are therefore posited as integral and essential to the holistic view that supreme insight is somehow present in every part of reality. There is a canon of verbal teachings and practical instructions that is elevated as the

55 DZZ I: 308. Cf. Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol 2: 57.

56 DZZ I: 310–134; ET: Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 2: 60–68.

standard against which to measure claims to enlightened insight. The fascicle thus informs both about the essential elements of the Buddha Way and its internal differentiation in terms of practical paths and groups of verbal / written teachings.

“Buddha’s Sutras” (*Bukkyō* 佛經)⁵⁷ continues this argument, while adding the topic of external delimitation. Its colophon states that it is based on an informal lecture given to Dōgen’s community in the fall of the year Kangen 1 (1243), during a temporary retreat at Kippō-ji in Echizen province.⁵⁸ It was thus delivered shortly after the community had left their home temple Kōshō-ji near the capital and relocated to the somewhat remote province of Echizen in Western Japan. This somewhat dramatic move is much debated in the literature, because its reasons are not explained in any of the texts associated with Dōgen. As Steven Heine and Funaoka Makoto have summed up in their respective reviews of the sources and literature on the subject, pressure from the dominant Tendai school on mount Hiei was probably one factor. The success of Enni Ben’en 円爾弁円 (1202–1280), a representative of the competing Rinzaï Zen school, also played a part. Enni had secured patronage by a top court official and was appointed head of the Tōfuku-ji, a major monastery under construction close to Dōgen’s Kōshō-ji.⁵⁹

These external factors, signs of severe competition between monasteries and clerics for aristocratic and state patronage, may have prompted Dōgen to give up on the project to become something like an officially acclaimed “teacher of the realm” (*kokushi* 国師), an ambition that is clearly visible in early texts like the *Discourse*. Instead, he now re-oriented his community towards the ideal of reclusive life (*tonsei* 遁世),⁶⁰ and strove to develop a model of temple administration that would ensure a large degree of freedom from political machinations and interference.⁶¹ The choice of Echizen as a location for the reclusive monastery was probably influenced by an offer for temple grounds from Dōgen’s patron Hatano Yoshishige. Connections between his Nihon Daruma-shū followers, many of whom hailed from a temple in this region, may also have played their part.⁶² This latter motive would explain why Dōgen may have felt

57 DZZ I: 405–414. ET in Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 3: 101–112.

58 DZZ I: 414; Nishijima / Cross.

59 Heine 2006: 156–172; Funaoka 2014: 175–177.

60 On this distinction and its ramifications, see Matsuo, “What is Kamakura New Buddhism? Official Monks and Reclusive Monks.”

61 Heine 2006: 32, 193, based on Ishii 2002.

62 Ōkubo 1966, 418–419; Heine 2006: 158.

an increased need to convince this segment of his community of his own vision of proper understanding and practice, because for them, returning to the vicinity of their home temple would have reinforced old allegiances. In the absence of clear textual evidence, however, all this remains a reasoned conjecture.

The fascicle “Buddha’s Sutras” reiterates the point that the sutras are an integral part of the teaching, and that seeing them as such is a criterion against which to measure the level of insight. This is contrasted to the teaching of “unreliable stinking skin-bags” (*zusan no shūhitai* 杜撰の臭皮袋)⁶³ in the Song empire who exclusively rely on silent meditation and posit the ultimate unity of the teachings of the Buddha with those of Daoism (*dōkyō* 道教) and Confucianism (*jukyō* 儒教).⁶⁴ The latter view held some popularity in China and was imported to Japan by monks, mostly from the Linji/Rinzai Zen school, who strove to bring the latest new trends from the center of the East Asian cultural sphere to the periphery, their homeland Japan.⁶⁵

Remarkably, Dōgen in this passage uses terms that are homonymous to modern Japanese denominational designations, although here they clearly refer to what is being said in the respective literary traditions (and not also for institutions, rituals, and so on). The terms are also used interchangeably with metonymical expressions, which identify traditions by way of their founder figures (*Rō Kō no oshie* 老孔の教え, “the teachings of Laozi and Confucius”).⁶⁶

While Dōgen concedes that there may be some validity in both traditions, he insists that neither Laozi nor Confucius were able to grasp the principle of karmic causality, and the presence of ultimate truth in every instance.⁶⁷ The invectives against aberrant views within the Zen school are further connected to derogatory remarks about the patriarch Linji that place him among the lower ranks of Zen patriarchs. This polemic may have been related to the attempt to convince the Nihon Daruma-shū followers of the superiority of Dōgen’s own interpretation, which integrated the written teachings and orthodox practice into a holistic mystical vision. Or, it may have been an attempt to strengthen ties

⁶³ Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 3: 106; DZZ I: 408.

⁶⁴ DZZ I: 411; Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 3: 108–110.

⁶⁵ Dōgen’s words clearly speak against the hypothesis of Timothy Brook (1992: 16–18) that the idea of the unity of the three teachings developed only later, in the Yuan Empire. See also fn. 72 below.

⁶⁶ DZZ I: 411; Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 3: 109.

⁶⁷ DZZ I: 411; cf. Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 3: 109–110. See also the following paragraph.

within Dōgen’s community vis-à-vis the upcoming Enni Ben’en.⁶⁸ In any case, where “Buddha’s teaching” is spelling out the essential contents and their subdivisions, “Buddha’s Sutras” ranks teachers and teachings within and outside of the Buddha Way according to the measure of full and comprehensive insight – an insight that is, Dōgen insists, both documented in the canonical literature and transmitted between Buddhas and patriarchs. Since he claims to stand in this line of transmission, he retains for himself a superior vantage point of judgment.

To sum up, “Buddha’s Sutras” uses *kyō* 教 as a general label that can be attached to a qualifying component. The resulting character compounds *bukkyō* 佛教, *dōkyō* 道教, and *jukyō* 儒教, referencing Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian traditions of thought and literature, are homonymous with present-day denominational designations, and synonymous with metonymical expressions such as “the teaching of Laozi/Confucius”. Dōgen, however, does not use *kyō* (or its Japanese reading *oshie*) as a hypernym. Furthermore, he establishes a clear ranking between the traditions, with insight into the law of karmic causality functioning as one of the *differentiae specifica*e placing the Buddha’s teaching in a class of its own. Within the confines of Buddhist teaching and their interpretation, Dōgen insists on a comprehensive and holistic interpretation, and uses derogatory language vis-à-vis exponents of competing views and clerics who base their claim to leadership on political support.

3.2 Castigating heresies

The last document to be discussed here is not dated, but was probably written around 1250. By this time, Dōgen had begun to work on a new edition of his collection of vernacular treatises. *Shizen biku* 四禪比丘 (“The *bhikṣu* (‘monk’) in the fourth stage of *dhyāna* (‘immersion’)”; quoted in the following as *Immersion*)⁶⁹ belongs to this new collection, of which 12 fascicles were completed. It has been argued that this group of texts was directed at an audience of devotees remaining in the common world, in contrast to the earlier collection, which had addressed primarily the inner circle of monastic disciples.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ His invective against monks who assume a position of superiority because of their backing high-ranking patrons supports this conjecture. Cf. DZZ I: 413; Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 3: 111.

⁶⁹ DZZ I: 704–716; ET: Nishijima / Cross 1994–1999, vol. 4: 195–212.

⁷⁰ Heine 1997.

Again, the treatise is concerned with what Dōgen perceives to be fatal misconceptions among followers of the Buddha Way. It starts out with a story, taken from the treatise *Dazhidulun*⁷¹, of a monk who, upon entering a deep stage of immersion, mistakenly believes he has reached the state of a saint (*arhat*, Jap. *arakan* 阿羅漢). This state should lead the practitioner to have a vision of a perfect Buddha realm at the end of his life. When he fails to have that vision, he concludes that the Buddha's teaching is wrong. Karmic retribution immediately follows, leading the monk to be born into an undesirable form of existence.⁷²

Immersion draws on this story to warn disciples not to set their own faculty of judgment above that of the Buddha. In addition, it castigates various views that stem from conflating the wisdom of the unenlightened with that of the Buddha Way. In this context, the text strongly emphasizes the opposition between the common life in the world, and the Buddha way. As a part of this discussion, it reiterates a point already made in "Buddha's Sutras", and repudiates the view of the "unity of the three teachings" (*sankyō itchi* 三教一致) of Confucius, Laozi and the Buddha.⁷³ *Immersion* once more wholeheartedly rejects this vision, and insists on the superiority of the Buddha Way in a manner that introduces a clear distinction between teachings (*kyō* 教) pertaining to common life and those that transcend its limits.

While it does not postulate an ontologically transcendent realm, the text clearly insists on the extraordinary faculties that distinguish enlightened beings from commoners; and it refers to knowledge transcending the boundaries of the present life as precisely one such criterion of distinction. *Immersion* sums up:

Those who study the way must be very clear about this: Confucius and Laozi did not know the *dharma*/law of the three temporal worlds, nor did they know the principle of cause and effect, nor did they know anything about how to establish peacefulness in one continent, not to speak of establishing it in all four continents.⁷⁴

It is, however, not simply their extraordinary, superhuman powers that set the enlightened beings apart from teachers of the common life. As another passage

71 Purportedly Kumārajīva's translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mahā prajñā pāramitā upadeśa*, *Taishō* No. 1509, Vol. 25.

72 DZZ I: 704. Cf. *Dazhidulun*, *Taishō* No. 1509, Vol. 25: 189.

73 In *Shizen Bikku*, Dōgen paraphrases this term (DZZ I: 708), but he verbally quotes it in *Eihei kōroku* V, 383, see DZZ II: ; ET: Leighton / Okumura : 342. In this formal lecture, he also unambiguously rejects that position.

74 *Gakusha akiraka ni shirubeshi, Kō Rō wa sanze no hō o shirazu, inga no dōri o shirazu, isshū no anritsu o shirazu, iwanya shishū no anritsu o shiranya*. 學者あきらかにしるべし、孔老は三世の法をしらず、因果の道理をしらず、一洲の安立をしらず、いはんや四洲の安立をしらんや。 DZZ I: 713. Cf. Nishijima 1999: 207.

from *Immersion* makes clear, the realm of the “common world” *includes* beings with extraordinary, superhuman powers such as the Indian gods Indra and Brahma; but, *Immersion* maintains, these are *inferior* to any human being who has chosen to renunciate and follow the path of monastic life:

And not even Wheel-turning Lords, Lord Brahma, or Indra himself are the equal of a monk who has left home life behind and been ordained, so how could they be equal to the Tathāgata?⁷⁵

This, now, does pose a challenge to the notion of ‘religion’: apparently, in Dōgen’s conception the fundamental distinction is between two realms that are extensionally one but intensionally distinct. The realm of “common life” (*zoku* 俗) comprises human beings, among them elevated wise men such as Confucius and Laozi, as well as gods with miraculous powers, who receive (although *Immersion* does not elaborate on this) cultic reverences that would fall under most accepted versions of the concept of ‘religion.’ The realm of the Buddha Way again comprises human beings and the enlightened ones, who have attained higher powers. Both are held to be ‘sacred,’ although to different degrees. In any case, doubt concerning the teaching of the Buddha Way amounts to ‘slander’ (*bō* 謗), and is threatened with massive karmic retribution. The fundamental distinction is thus incommensurate with that between the ‘numinous’ in a general sense, and the ordinary. It does conform, however, to the idea that religion is concerned with soteriology; indeed, soteriology here defines what counts as ‘truly sacred’, singling out those aspects of the miraculous and extraordinary that pertain to an (alleged) superior knowledge of the world’s condition and its consequences for the achievement of salvation.

Readers in accord with classical modern theory of religion might be tempted to interpret this as conforming to an evolutionary pattern according to which some purely religio-ethical idea supersedes a more primitive attachment to the miraculous. It deserves mentioning, however, that *Immersion* as well as other writings from the Dōgen Canon, such as the *Discourse*, are far from de-emphasizing the *miraculous* powers of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Patriarchs. Quite to the contrary, *Immersion* even lists knowledge about “sacred relics” (*shari* 舍利; from Skt. *śarīra*) among the defining differences between the Buddha Dharma and the teachings of Confucius and Laozi, who possess no such

⁷⁵ Rin’ō, Bon’ō, Taishaku, *nao shukke jugu no bikku ni oyobazu, ika ni iwanya Nyorai ni hitoshikaranya*. 輪王、梵王、帝釋、なほ出家受具の比丘に及ばず、いかにいはんや如來にひとしからんや。DZZ I: 710. Cf. Nishijima 1999: 203.

knowledge,⁷⁶ while the *Discourse* eulogizes the miraculous effects of seated meditation in no unsure terms. In sum, the teachings of our corpus are no champion of “enlightened religion” in the modern, Western sense – and how could or should they, in the absence of those concepts of science that would force the miraculous out of the natural world?

4 Conclusions

To briefly sum up, a careful analysis of the semantics of focal terms in our corpus revealed important analogies with prevalent modern notions of religion; among them are the fundamental distinction between a sphere of common life and an elevated sphere of the sacred, which is the source of salvation and conforms to laws of its own, standing outside and above the legal and political authority of common society; the requirement to place trust in the authority of elevated beings, who are believed to possess extraordinary powers of insight and manipulation of reality; the notion of an orthodoxy, denial of which is threatened with dire consequences; the emphasis on a “truth” that calls for belief, even if such belief is supported by evidence from stringent contemplation of common life; and last but not least, general terms that subsume various traditions as so many instances of a kind.

Analogies, however, are not equivalences, and the notion of religion may become a ‘false friend’ if important divergences are ignored: in our corpus, the general terms are never used in a neutral way; they are, in other words, regularly connected to evaluative predications that imply a strict qualitative hierarchy between the referents of the hyponyms; orthodoxy, at least in the *Discourse*, is defined not by a set of abstract doctrines, but first by lineage and then by ritual practice (although *Immersion* suggests that some essential doctrines, such as that of karmic retribution, exist); the common world is identified as a sphere of reality that comprises elevated beings with superhuman powers, who are the object of legitimate cultic reverence; the sphere of the sacred is intensionally, but not extensionally posited above the common world; certain miraculous and magical powers and effects are an essential element of the superiority of the sacred realm.

A further question concerns the evaluation of these results. One may argue that the corpus of my analysis was identified and designed in a manner that preconditioned it to find analogies to religion. It is certainly correct to say that, in

⁷⁶ DZZ I: 712.

singling out texts serving to define and elucidate a new teaching, and to educate a community of disciples dedicated to following a teacher, I was led by modern notions of religion (as defined by doctrine, as built by founding figures and centered around leaders, and so forth). Awareness of this circle of reasoning is definitely important in order to prevent one from drawing exaggerated conclusions. What the analysis above demonstrates is simply that there is a text corpus, centered around such a teacher from the Japanese medieval period. This person articulated ideas with certain, essential conformances to modern ideas of religion, and he found a community of followers who shared his vision to some degree. These then built a tradition that has lasted until today. While this may sound trivial, it still proves wrong those who believe the concept of religion to be without true referent in pre-modern times. Yet again, this does not mean that one can now triumphantly apply this concept, without hesitation or much further ado, and expatiate on Japanese religiosity. Quite to the contrary, the analysis above has shown that, even with such pre-selection of texts, there are, on many levels, important divergences to received notions of religion, and these surely demand attention. To re-iterate just one point pertaining not to content, but to performativity: As we have seen above, even a seemingly discursive, explicative text like the *Essentials* was recommended for use in later times not so much as an object of reflective reading and discussion, but as an object of *recitation*, a practice that prioritizes *appresentation of words* over *representation of meaning*. There is good reason from evidence in the Dōgen Canon to believe that this way of reading was predominant even in Dōgen's community, and that it was connected to belief in the beneficial karmic effects of such appresentation of words.⁷⁷ If we focus exclusively on discursive statements of belief, we may well miss what was most essential to those participating in Japanese medieval religion.

Furthermore, one cannot equate Dōgen's conceptualization of the Buddha Way with common Japanese notions of his time. In many respects (and his employment of references to the miraculous and magical notwithstanding), he was a representative of 'high religion,' speaking to a limited circle of literate believers from the upper strata of society. Even so, he was evidently often at odds with the views of his audiences/readers. It was modern scholarship that fashioned him as one representative of "Kamakura New Buddhism," and thus, of a distinctly Japanese religiosity.⁷⁸ And part of his modern renown may well stem

⁷⁷ Cf. the fascicle "Reading *sūtras*" (*Kankin* 看經) in the vernacular *Shōbōgenzō* collection (DZZ I: 268–276); cf. also Steineck 2009a; 2011.

⁷⁸ Most notably, Watsuji Tetsurō's pertinent monography on Dōgen, which was recently translated into English, see Watsuji und Bein 2011.

from the fact that his writings offer enough analogies to modern notions of religion to let him appear, to willing eyes, as a forerunner of contemporary ideals. In terms of historiography, it is thus definitely essential to place Dōgen firmly in the context of the society and culture of his time.

At the same time, the semantical analysis given above has provided us with a nuanced image of the way in which one medieval Japanese intellectual conceived of his own religion and the various teachings of his time. It has proven itself capable of producing information that can correct received notions, and it is thus a road worth taking in exploring concepts of religion – even if it is in need of complementation by other historiographical methods.

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